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Approved For Release 2004/08/19 : CIA-RDP80R01720R000500070009-7

26 September 1967

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Bombing Policy

1. As Mr. Nitze put it very well, there are two possible explanations for present North Vietnamese line on the interrelationship by the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam and the possibility of negotiations, a line that in its strictest form holds that negotiations are impossible so long as the bombing continues.

a. One explanation is that North Vietnamese are simply playing this theme in an attempt to get the bombing suspended, without having any desire to enter into meaningful talks although they might be willing to sit down at a table in an attempt to tie our hands and give them a respite.

b. The North Vietnamese are serious, believe that for face reasons cannot enter into talks while bombing continues, but would be willing to open meaningful discussions if the bombing were suspended.

2. I am personally inclined to the first rather than the second of these two explanations. I believe that the North Vietnamese feel that political pressure against the war will mount beyond internationally and particularly within the United States and that Hanoi further feels that the longer it waits the more these pressures will force the U.S. Government's hand. Thus, I doubt if Hanoi would be willing to enter into discussions before November 1968.

3. If the above reasoning is correct, suspension of the bombing will probably not, of itself, produce meaningful negotiations. A bombing suspension, however, could be politically useful in placing the opprobrium

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for continuation of the war squarely on Hanoi by calling Hanoi's bluff with regard to the widely held belief that U.S. bombing is the only major obstacle to peace. While bombing suspension would not necessarily change Hanoi's mind it might take some of the steam out of domestic and international criticism of U.S. policy and thus reduce these political pressures below an unacceptable threshold.

4. The above points were all covered in my 25 September conversation with Messrs. McNamara and Nitze, both of whom were in general agreement with my position. Mr. McNamara suggested that a bombing suspension would be possible and could be extended only if the North Vietnamese ceased such overt actions as shelling SVN (e.g., Con Thien) from North Vietnamese territory, made no major effort to take advantage of the respite to resupply their forces in the South and enter into discussions that were in some measure productive. Mr. Nitze and I pointed out that with a possible exception of artillery attacks from North Vietnam the U.S. would find it difficult to build an air tight case of North Vietnamese noncompliance in these key areas. Thus, Hanoi would be gambling that whatever strictures we attempt to impose privately, once the bombing had stopped it would be politically difficult for us to resume no matter what Hanoi did or did not do. Consequently if the decision were taken to try a suspension of bombing, the U.S. would have to have clearly in mind beforehand what it would consider bench marks of satisfactory North Vietnamese performance and would have to be prepared to resume the bombing if these bench marks were not made.

5. A suspension of bombing by itself will probably not produce meaningful negotiations. Conversely the continuation, or even expansion, of the bombing -- by itself -- will also not force a change in North Vietnamese strategy. Hanoi strategy is not likely to change until it is disabused of the belief that political pressures in the U.S. will force the U.S. Government to behave as the French behaved in 1954 or until North Vietnam senses that despite its present strategy a viable non-Communist state structure is swiftly evolving in South Vietnam. This is not to say, however, that bombing is worthless. Since bombing of the North does constitute a continuing element of pressure impelling Hanoi towards a realistic appraisal of U.S. and South Vietnamese evolution and without the pressure that bombing involves, Hanoi would have no strong inducement not to carry on the struggle forever -- regardless of U.S. or South Vietnamese political trends -- in the hope that something politically advantageous might turn up.

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Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs

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